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ABSTRACT

Career development has become important in organizations struggling with restructuring and its effects on employees. Employees now understand the process as a way to gain employability skills in order to obtain different jobs within their companies or elsewhere. Career development often takes place in workshops, although many people prefer a more private setting, at least initially. Self-assessment tools can be used, but they should avoid any association with tests. A range of career-learning material should be offered, such as self-help libraries and software systems such as DISCOVER, Career Builder, or System of Interactive Guidance and Information (SIGI) PLUS. The best workshop design seems to be 2 consecutive days followed up with a day 5-8 weeks later. An external career trainer should lead the workshops, rather than an internal trainer. Managers should undertake the process first so that they can learn to be career coaches for their employees. Employees should be encouraged to develop their self-knowledge and then to develop knowledge of other jobs they might like. Although employers fear that most employees will ask for promotions, most employees actually want more variety and more opportunity to learn in their jobs. Mentoring support can be helpful, and bottom-up succession planning is more useful than the older top-down method. Some reasons for the failure of career development programs are as follows: they focus on the needs of only a portion of the employee population with an organization; they rely on inadequate methods of self-assessment measurement; they avoid a systems approach; they depend on workshops as the only learning media; upper management has not been part of the process before implementation; and performance appraisal discussions have been mixed with career review discussions. Today's organization is not the authoritarian vertical hierarchical type; employees need career development programs to react to changing needs of the organization and the marketplace. (KC)

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What Works and What Doesn't in Career Development Programs

by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Worklife Network

Career development is currently a topic under considerable scrutiny by HRM and Training professionals. Both seek interventions and learning experiences which will help staff adjust to the new era of maintaining their employability rather than long-term tenure.

Career support programs have experienced fluctuating fortunes over the past decade. Many people, usually at Executive level, dismissed them as too 'new age' or 'touchy feelly', or an indulgence in the employees' direction rather than improving organisational productivity and effectiveness. Several well-meaning people battled this resistance and proceeded with career support workshops, only to be disappointed when achievement of objectives appeared confused or participants did not take responsibility for their own career growth. Among this group were many who did not realise that workshops are not necessarily the best vehicle for helping staff with their career enrichment responsibilities.

Program Renaissance

The recent recession has contributed to a renaissance of career development support activities by employers. Career development has been selected by many employers as the learning vehicle by which the new post-restructuring organisational culture can be communicated and staff cooperation secured. The drastic adjustments to their infrastructure and personnel require different ways of getting job tasks done. Working smarter and creative thinking and acting are the emerging expectations from management. Some organisations are reflecting these changes by shredding all job descriptions, believing these restrain rather than free up their human resource capabilities.

Other contributing factors are the revision in meaning of the employment relationship, the initiative of staff who observed downsizing with increasing concern and took on the determination to improve their employability whilst others around them were losing theirs, and the growth of competencies, rather than qualifications, with its associated vocabulary of definitions increasing as a measure of a person's suitability for a job role, or transfer or promotion.

Instead of creating loyalty which, by association implies longevity in the partnership between employer and employee, staff need to become more entrepreneurial, committed to lifelong learning, and no longer expect promotions to be handed to them as a reward. Neither employee nor employer has a future obligation to the other. Pay is earned today in whatever job role by contributing to the organisation's changing needs in winning customers, then maintaining and growing this relationship by better service and innovation in products and delivery standards. If the employer fails to meet market needs, there is no longer even an implied promise of next month's salary being paid into the bank account.

Worklife has been providing in-company career training since 1983. In the past year 98 workshops have been facilitated with over 1078 employees participating. Career development support strategies have been designed in partnership with more than 22 organisations since 1994.

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More employers are recognising that, for their staff to respond favourably to these new demands, they require a different form of security, in addition to pay. They are choosing education in career self-resiliency as the methodology to convey it.

Data Sources

Over the past 17 years, Worklife has accumulated a great deal of information across Australia about what employees want in career development support and what is economical for employers to invest in and provide. In the past year, experienced career development professionals within The Worklife Network have contributed to the career self-resilience of more than 4000 people in organisations within both private sector and Government employ. In addition, we have travelled extensively overseas and established network links by which we are alerted to the latest findings, academic research and organisational experiences.

We want to share our findings and help employers further through our understanding of a systems approach to career development within organisations.

Financial Success Indicator

Just one illustration of our research will help here. Kravetz Associates of Illinois (est. 1976) studied the key people-management factors that predict company financial success. 250 employers of the Forbes 500 were involved in the effort. Kravetz found 80 factors that have a significant correlation with company financial success. Having an effective career development system was the fifth most important predictor, correlating approximately .40 with a composite financial index which included profit margins, growth in sales and growth in profit margins, among other criteria. This is another way of saying that companies that had effective career development programs for their employees were more financially successful than those who lacked such programs.

In all our in-company programs we have found it necessary to define career development for employees.

As to why career development has such an impact on bottom-line results, the evidence is that when employees understand themselves and where they are going and want to go, this translates into financial success. They pursue jobs that use their preferred competencies. This ultimately results in better productivity and fewer dysfunctional behaviours. In addition, when management can match job openings or project task responsibilities clearly with employee self-assessed capabilities and their career values, better productivity results. When restructuring, employers know accurately what jobs to reassign to existing employees rather than guess at person-job match. There is also more equity in deciding who has to go.

While career development had one of the highest correlations with company financial success, Kravetz found it was one of the lowest areas of the 80 predictors in terms of effectiveness. This means not many employers know how to design and implement career development programs which bring about desired results.

What Works and What Doesn't

What is career development for employees? How do staff define it and what are they really looking for within such programs? Fortunately, we have much to share to help find the answers, as we have stood in front of and alongside so many employees in both group learning settings and one-to-one career and worklife advisory support situations. Also, at Worklife, we have enjoyed many satisfying partnerships with HRM and Training professionals on the staff of our client organisations pooling observations and debating these issues at length. The synergy between consultant and client has been empowering for both parties in an area of knowledge about people at work which traverses behavioural science, psychology, sociology and commerce and where formally documented theories about adult career development only date back to 1974.

Where to Start

In all our in-company programs we have found it necessary to define career development for employees. So many have a singular belief that career development concerns only their future—their next—job move. Our education starts by illustrating that career development is as much about developing their current job as seeking the next one. Career development is as much about work and life balance, and therefore life management, as

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about relationships with colleagues, current boss and employer.

Furthermore, we found a very low incidence of awareness of how to undertake career review. This should not be surprising, as our secondary and tertiary education institutions fail to include student training in career and life planning in their syllabi. At present, it's left to employers to provide the education which was omitted in their employees' younger years.

Assuming Ownership

We found ample evidence of the willingness of employees to undertake career development once this education had taken place. Most initially perceived career development as activities you take when an unexpected event of a negative nature occurs, such as threat to or loss of job. Our bookshops are now stocked with an extensive array of literature—texts, planning workbooks, self-review materials—sourced from UK, US and a growing body of Australian authors. Yet our random survey of bookshop staff revealed that purchasers invariably buy the job hunt materials and bypass the self-review and career targeting offerings. Buyers are into career transition help and vaulting—or deliberately avoiding—the self-review and planning steps.

The readiness of employees to participate when an employer offers self-review and planning help can be regarded as a benefit extrapolating from the recession years. Rarely did we find an employee who had not lost their job through redundancy, or knew a family member or friend who had. This contributes to an acceptance that career protection can only be done by the individual. They are eager learners as a consequence.

We have found in post-recession career training much less blaming the employer or 'the system' than pre-recession.

This career education helps in other ways. For example, we found in post-recession career training much less blaming the employer or 'the system' than pre-recession. Before commencing the learning process, our trainers need to allow much less time for cathartic release of any anger, resentment or emotional pain than pre-recession. What we have noticed is that more time needs to be given to settling down participants' fears that the commencement of this form of help by their employer has a hidden agenda. 'It's a disguised form of outplacement,' some say. This reflects the breakdown in trust and former feelings of safe dependency on their employer.

Partnership with Employer

Employees made it clear many times that, while they were eager to take over responsibility for their career management, they felt that they could not do it without considerable support from their employer. They expressed the need for many things—some realistic, others not. It's part of the career training process to teach what is a realistic expectation of support and what the employee can achieve by self-help.

Self-Assessment Tools

The highest expectation from employer support is for tools for the employee to assess themselves—to gather the essential database from which career planning can proceed. In this area, many shared negative views on tests or psychometric instruments, or inventories—where they completed them, had their responses taken way and received a report back 'telling me who I am'. Resentment has been exceptionally strong about these processes, and trainers and recruitment officers should take note and reassess which tools they are administering. We observed that bad feelings about tests linger.

At Worklife, our career counselling and career training team has long been aware that tests are inappropriate tools. We have developed expertise in and, in fact, designed many Career Assessment Instruments. 'CAIs', as we commonly refer to them, are essentially self-assessment tools. We have also developed and refined many Structured Questionnaires to help the Self-Assessment phase.

Career Planning Database

What comprises the minimum database from which career planning can take place? Our experience is that each employee needs to assemble self-selected data about: their preferred or motivated skills; their career values; their primary wants at the current stage of their career and life; an appraisal of their career action constraints—their belief system; their motivated interests; and conclude with documenting their

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desired new learning. What is least useful are personality inventories which produce confining labels such as 'thruster-negotiator' and the like.

Self-Assessment Accuracy

Several HRM professionals query the ability of an employee to self-assess accurately. I recommend that a perusal of Adult Career Development literature and research findings will provide considerable reassurance about this. At the end of the day, the employer makes their own judgement on a career action step request from an employee. The power to reassign—and where—remains an employer's prerogative.

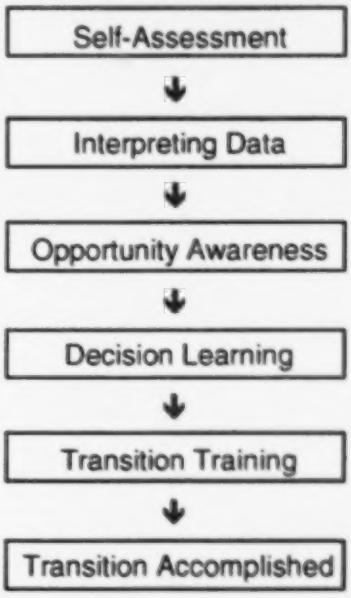
Preferences for Learning Media

Workshops are the most popular form of employer sponsored career support. We share a strong caution here. People learn in different ways. The medium of a small group training event does not appeal to all. Some fear being forced into uncomfortable self-disclosure. The skill of the learning facilitator is paramount here. Furthermore, the career subject is very much a personal one. Many want privacy, particularly through the Self-Assessment and Opportunity Awareness stages.

Within AGC, the finance company, 738 (48%) of the employee population volunteered for workshops within the first six months. We learned that it would be wrong to assume 52% did not care about their careers. Many of the 52% keenly pursued this knowledge using other media, quietly and unobtrusively.

We have found that many employees can learn and self-manage their way by accessing structured career planning workbooks, employer-sponsored career self-help libraries or comprehensive software systems such as DISCOVER for Organisations, Career Builder or SIGI PLUS.

Stevens' Model of Career Development



Often, when an employee has used one or more of these, they are more willing and, in fact, eager to enrol in a workshop learning event. Similarly, we have found that workshop graduates frequently move on to these other career support resources for further work and/or reinforcement of their developing career-related thoughts.

The best option is for an employer to offer a range of career support learning media.

Whatever the components of an employer's career support system, it is our experience that any compelled use of them will result in inappropriate career development behaviours by employees and poor return on investment. Essentially, all career development support must be offered as an invitation to employees for their voluntary participation.

Workshop Design

We have experimented with many formats over the years. Our more effective results come from a design which allows for two consecutive days to be followed by a follow up day at least five but no more than eight weeks later. This gives time for much to happen. The employee reflects on the education and the self-assessment data surfaced and documented, undertakes self-initiated career exploration, gathers data, consults and drafts options, concurrent with carrying out their current job responsibilities.

Because employees harbour lingering feelings of distrust of their employers, more effective learning occurs when an external career trainer leads the process with an internal trainer as co-facilitator rather than lead spokesperson. Furthermore, a setback can easily occur if the managing director decides to open the workshop proceedings! He or she is best kept out of the way, but not left uninformed!

Our experience is that managers need to experience the career education and self-assessment tuition themselves before they want to learn career coaching.

Manager as Career Coach

Because of the personal nature of career and life review, it is unrea-

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sonable to expect all employees to involve their manager willingly from Stage One onwards. Employees accept that at some stage, preferably no later than Decision Learning, they need to present to and consult their manager. However, if this relationship is forced, they often abandon any further work on their own career planning.

Because of this, managers need help in how to be an effective career coach. Our experience is that managers need to undergo the career education and self-assessment tuition themselves before they want to learn career coaching. In other words, they want their own career needs serviced first. We have observed this makes them more willing to help subordinates through supportive career coaching behaviours.

Career Exploration

We have found many employees welcoming the changed employment environment as they progress through the elements of a career support program. They are not all seeking published career path information, preferring to become detectives and sleuth out among organisational needs where their interests and skills may best be applied. As there is no longer job security, many seem to have been given permission to strike out and consider career moves away from the linear and traditional. As one said to us: "There's something more exciting about not knowing exactly what's going to happen next."

Others, though, expect the old system's supply of organisational charts and publicised job vacancies. They expect details of career opportunities to be delivered to their desks. It will be no surprise that we have found the latter attitudes prevalent at the beginning of career programs and the former emerging at the conclusion of the formal education process.

When employees have been inspired to undertake their own career exploration within their current employment environment, it is essential that they can approach people who will provide information frankly. Exploration, or Opportunity Awareness, must take place before Decision Learning. People receiving information-gathering requests should not be reticent because they fear their own job safety. They should, however, recognise the evidence of these career action initiatives by colleagues and do their own future employability action taking.

Rejuvenating the Plateaued

It is pleasing to observe an older person wanting to experiment with different job tasks and problem-solving issues rather than stay cocooned in work they know so well, having mastered it but no longer finding it stimulating. Many a mature aged employee who viewed themselves as having plateaued, has been rejuvenated in spirit, action and determination as a result of career development support.

Multi-Tasking Preferences

A significant majority of employees hanker after more variety in their job tasks. They want new learning, though what they want to learn differs from person to person. Employers should be more courageous here. An excellent example is the Prince of Wales, Prince Henry and South Sydney Hospitals where, under their program, cleaners, catering staff, porters and ward assistants have been encouraged to become multi-skilled to work as patient services assistants. Old, confining job titles have been abandoned. This program has saved $1.7 M in annual cleaning bills, as well as improving patient care and employee satisfaction.

HR Monthly (June 95) confirmed this trend by reporting a survey of 1300 employees within a Queensland employer which found task variety to be the strongest predictor of job satisfaction.

A significant majority of employees hanker after more variety in their job tasks. They want new learning.

This is the new form of job security—expanded employability by extending the mastery of skills. We have found large numbers of employees wanting this but feeling frustrated by management insisting on expertise delineation the old way. But first we have to help them explore themselves in a non-threatening way and surface their array of skills, many of which they were not conscious of beforehand.

Coping With Uncertainty

We have found much evidence that once an employee's employability confidence and personal career management expertise have been increased, they are less apprehensive about future organisational change. They feel secure that they have compiled data about themselves which they can

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use to identify a set of work tasks in any reasonable amount of change which could be forthcoming. And, if they are unable to find a match where they work, they know that they have wider options than before in the labour market externally.

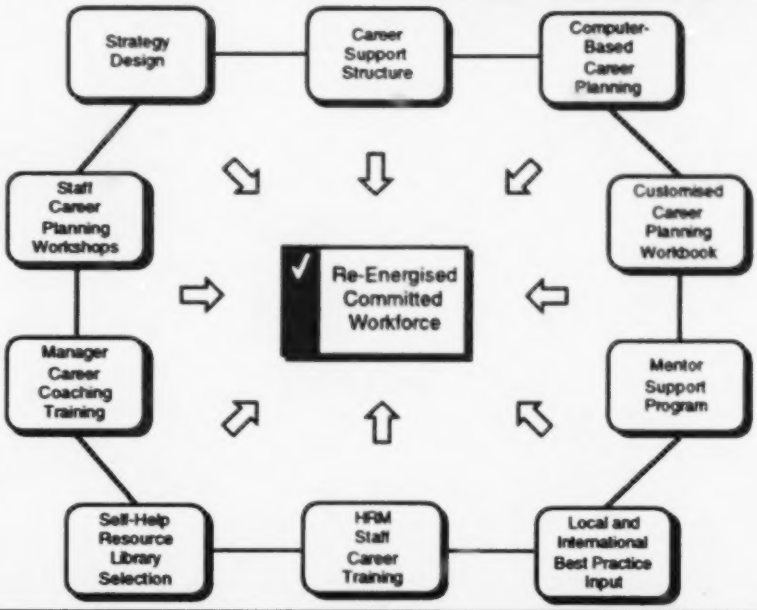
Career Decision Making

While we have found, in general, that employees of all ages have been willing to get going with the self-review and exploration process, we have observed the employee falter a multitude of times at the stage of decision making. That's why in our Model we have titled this stage 'Decision Learning'. Here the employee needs the most help. They have produced a number of realistic options—choices of career action steps that relate to who they are and where they work. They falter when a choice has to be made. The commitment to one course of action deters most. One-to-one counselling support is very useful here, as is sensitive coaching from one's manager. Another source of support is accessing a mentor either within or external to the employment environment.

Mentoring Support

We have found that including in the systems approach to career development support a voluntary access and select-your-own-mentor service has substantially improved the results for both the employee and the employer. We have found it important to provide specific training for the mentors. When employees have had their mentors chosen for them, we have observed far from satisfactory results. An alternative support is to engage the service of an external career management counselling provider for contracted mentoring. On a controlled basis, employees can be funded to such a service and helped over this barrier through to successful implementation of their career determinations.

In none of the organisational environments we have conducted these programs have the Line Managers or HRM staff been inundated with requests for promotion.



A Deluge of Promotion Petitions

No, definitely not. In none of the organisational environments we have conducted these programs have the Line Managers or HRM staff been inundated with requests for promotion. What has surfaced in volume is approval seeking for enriching current job.

We influence employees to document their determinations in the form of a Career Action Step Proposal for review by their manager. This document must clearly indicate what the person is seeking, why they think they merit it, what benefit to the employer will result and, most essential, what the person is prepared to contribute to help the request be realised.

Downshifting Features

In some situations, we have observed downshifting requests emanating from this process. People who want less responsibility and have now found the courage to risk requesting it. Often it is sought for a defined period which may be stimulated by birth of a child in their family or other non-work desires or occurrences. These people should not be considered as no longer ambitious. They are exercising work and life balance prerogatives and should be encouraged. No shame should be associated with well-reasoned requests of this nature. It is better for the business to concur as the alternative is losing the person to another employer or workforce.

Let's Delay Until Restructuring Is Over

Our knowledge says the opposite. It is amidst times of change within the employment environ-

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ment that career development support is most wanted and useful to both employees and employers. They ride out the hiccups of changed status, allocation of tasks, etc. better.

A common misinterpretation is that employees need settled jobs on the organisation chart in order to career plan. That is not the case.

A common misinterpretation is that employees need settled jobs on the organisation chart in order to career plan. That is not the case. What they need is a set of specifications about self about composites of job content that will fit their uniqueness. They need to be aware of the wonder and usefulness of transferable skills and the critical aspect of their attitude. They need to have a sense of career resiliency. These are the outcomes of career development programs in times of change. As one Managing Director said to me recently: "I know I will have to change the organisation structure more than once in the next year. Trouble is I will not know how until the time arrives and I worry that staff will not respond quickly to changed roles but quit the ship physically or mentally when all I am doing is making it safer for them."

Job Vacancy Posting Insufficient

Proposals for career moves should not be discouraged, nor should they wait until vacancies occur and jobs need to be filled. An employee should be encouraged to investigate and target jobs currently occupied. When their plans are communicated, HRM functions can maintain succession matrices laterally and hierarchically. This resembles a chess board matrix and is best managed by software programs.

In this way, implementation of organisational change can be expedited and selection for expected and unexpected vacancies promptly effected. HRM knows for most, if not all, jobs who wants what and has a good case submitted to be considered.

We have found employees are often discouraged by the difficulty of finding out detailed information about job requirements where jobs are occupied. The tendency is to publicise such data only when a job is vacant. How can a person plan their development if they do not know the requirements of their target? They are prevented from doing their 'homework'. Economic hazards occur for both parties if employees are not saved from inadvertently targeting and going into poorly fitting jobs. More openness by employers is required here.

Bottom Up Succession Planning

In my former career as a Personnel Manager over twenty years, I managed succession planning top down. My responsibility was to maintain confidential recording of who would succeed whom, if need be, and liaise with the Chief Executive on this. Modern career development practice does not supersede this but adds an opposite dimension. When employees are stimulated to submit their short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals, management has a better idea of who wants what. The system I formerly operated only conjectured at the preferences of the individual. We were often wrong and discovered our error only when the time came to act on job moves.

Worklife has yet to see an organisation operate their succession planning fully in this 'bottom up' manner, but several of our client companies are moving towards this.

Why Some Career Development Programs Fail

Some fail because they often focus on the needs of only a portion of the employee population within an organisation; because they rely on inadequate methods of self-assessment measurement; because they avoid a systems approach and instead have focused on only one or two bits and pieces; because they depend on career workshops as the only learning media; because the Executive team has not been a part of the consultative process before implementation; because performance appraisal discussions have been mixed in with career review discussions.

Employers need managers who are better at persuading than giving orders, who know how to coach and build consensus; who add value by negotiating job assignments with people

Today's organisation is a far cry from the authoritarian vertical hierarchy in which I learned personnel management—my first profession. The cross-functional ties among individuals and business units are increasingly important. There are many more chan-

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nels of activity and communication laterally within than before.

Managerial skill demands are changing. Employers need managers who are better at persuading than giving orders, who know how to coach and build consensus; who add value by negotiating job assignments with people, not presiding over 'parishes of power' and directing who goes where.

The focus is outwards to the customer. Human resources to service the market will vote with their feet unless their desires are heard, attention given to their individuality and their changing needs as they traverse their adult years in employment. Career change needs to be facilitated more within so that an employee does not feel they have no choice but to resign to seek elsewhere fulfilment of their changed needs, motivations and interests.

The younger generation is being more discriminating when choosing an employer. They are deciding on evidence that comprehensive career development programs exist or they don't. Shortly, the employer who can not advertise they have one will lose out on quality applicants.

Customised Programs Essential

At Worklife, we have made our full share of misjudgments in career development design. We don't know it all! But our wealth of experiences and our consultative partnerships with many employers help us to be much more confident in the pragmatism of our advice. We have seen the power of carefully planned career development program design enacting change more effectively than most other human resource type interventions. To date, our work has extended into the following industries: card services, finance, banking, information systems, consultancy, insurance, government employ, office equipment, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, food production, professional associations, building materials—each have their own nuances.

Packaged approaches to career development do not work. Each has to be tailored to suit the nature of the employment environment. Human behaviour is the same, the context in which those behaviours function and respond differs.

I will long remember a young woman pulling me aside and saying:

"Thank you for helping this butterfly find her true colours."

When a person is helped to know who they really are and to like themselves better, both the employee and employer benefit.

The WORKLIFE™ Network

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